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AUTHOR Gray, Philip A.
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ABSTRACT

Since media consumers must make a great many judgments about media messages and the effectiveness of any given message in meeting one's needs, media teachers should develop materials and activities to facilitate the learning of effective media usage skills. Teachers can help students to become more effective media consumers by providing an understanding of how the media are used, the skills associated with effective media usage, the criteria by which utility is judged, and the means by which users can effect change. The taxonomy of communication functions recommended by the Speech Communication Association can serve as a useful guide for developing activities that encourage students to examine their own media usage behavior. Teachers can decide which media receiver skills should receive instruction by analyzing those skills associated with understanding oneself in relation to media, the message context, and the message content. To help students make judgments about media message utility and credibility, teachers should stress the variables of message source and message content. Finally, teachers should give attention to the ways students can influence the media, including gaining access, campaigning intelligently for change, joining organizations, knowing interested parties, and utilizing techniques for giving feedback, (HOD)

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THE MEDIA CONSUMER: A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Philip A. Gray

Associate Professor of Communication Studies

Northern Illinois University

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THE MEDIA CONSUMER: A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Recently, the pages of scholarly journals focusing upon communication education have included a substantial number of articles dealing both with the teaching of listening skills and the growing interest in research examining the nature of conceptual analysis in the listening context.[1] At the same time, we learn that "while there has indeed been a rapid increase in the information being made available to the public, the offering of informational material is growing far faster than what is being absorbed."[2] The growth of our information society suggests a rapid proliferation of media sources with the consumers of that information being placed in the position of having to make more and more decisions about which sources to use and which information from any source is useful to them, i.e., the media consumer is becoming his/her own regulator.

Unfortunately, from the perspective of the media teacher, most of the teaching materials and research in listening behavior appear to focus upon listening in the interpersonal context rather than upon the behavior of the "listener" in a mediated communication context. The purpose of this article is to suggest that such perceptions are not necessarily accurate, that much of what we are discovering about listening behavior can be applied to media consumers and that, in fact, increasing attention is being given to the role of the media consumer as a "user" of information.

The Media Consumer

Throughout the history of the development of media technology there has been an assumption that media messages were being produced for an audience, "a group of listeners or spectators . . . the reading public."[3] Implied in this definition is a sense of group identity, persons with a similarity of

interest and/or purpose, e.g., the audience for a theatrical or musical presentation. The significant differences between theatrical audiences and media audiences have been matters of size and physical separation. It is most unlikely, however, that such audiences actually exist. What is most likely is that the media audience is simply a variety of individuals using a variety of media sources for a variety of purposes.

Textbooks written for the mass communication course have tended to reinforce the conceptualization of users of media as constituting an audience by focusing on media as institutions, media history, media technology, and media effects.[4] Some of these texts have included a discussion of uses and gratification research studies, but, for the most part, the discussion focuses upon concepts which continue to presume media initiative rather than user initiative. For example, texts often suggest that "as individuals we are affected by vicarious media experiences and we interact with others who are also affected."[5] On the surface, such statements appear logical. We may also be affected by a panorama of trees turning red and gold in the autumn. Implicit in the first statement is an assumption of source intention. The second suggests that our perceptions as individuals determine the effect.

And, communication models are becoming more sophisticated and complex, more accurately representing the multitude of variables bearing upon the communication process. These models, however, continue to represent communication as a process initiated by a source and transmitted to a receiver (audience) whose primary function appears to be to produce feedback for the benefit of the message source. Such models fail to accurately represent the "receiver" role as often being one of initiative - the seeking and use of messages. An accompanying problem associated with such models is the tendency to refer to specific messages being transmitted through specific media. This leads to a perception that the receivers of that message were a discrete

entity associated with a specific medium rather than individuals who use a variety of media sources to create their own messages.

Much attention has been given to the effects of television on receivers, particularly children. Who would disagree that television has drastically altered the lifestyle of the average American? Again, however, why do we assume initiative on the part of the media? Do we not, as average Americans, alter our own lifestyles to make use of that technology which we find useful? Our lifestyles have changed because we chose to change them, not because we were forced to change our lifestyles by media message producers. It might even be more appropriate to state that the kind of people we are as average Americans affects the nature of our media.

A number of writers, including mass communication text authors,[6] are beginning, in fact, to make that proposition. Thayer, for example, notes that the measurable and expliable phenomenon "is not that of the 'effects' of the media on people, but that of the effects <u>on</u> the media of the <u>uses</u> to which people put the media and their fare."[7] Brummett suggests that people "participate in making reality" and that "meaning is not discovered in situations but <u>created</u> by rhetors."[8] Becker proposes that "as individuals we tend to grasp from this mosaic [our communication environment] those pieces [of information] which may best serve our individual needs; group them into messages which are relevant for us at the time; and, . . . organize the bits of information . . . in order to arrive at a coherent picture of the world to which we can respond."[9] According to Becker, the combination of media we use "provides the construction materials" for the messages we believe.[10]

If we believe that it is important that students learn to listen more effectively and that we develop curricular materials and activites to facilitate that learning, then we ought, as well, begin to develop materials and activities to facilitate the learning of effective media usage skills. To do

this requires a clearer understanding of how we use the media, the skills associated with effective media usage, the criteria by which we judge utility, and the means available to us as consumers to bring about change in order to obtain media messages we need.

Media Uses.

For years, researchers have presented us with information about the media consumption habits of people, how much time is devoted to reading newspapers, the hours spent in front of the television receiver, etc. Useful as such studies may be, they do not tell us much about the actual use being made of the messages provided through the media or why we select one medium over another. Observation of the media habits of most of us suggest that we can begin to understand the uses we make of media messages by accepting the following assumptions.

1. Our use of media is largely voluntary, not compulsory. The growth of the various media industries has come about, not because media corporations dictated that we must use their products, but because we demanded and continue to demand those media products we want.

2. For the most part, our consumption of media messages is to satisfy relatively immediate needs. There appears to be little demand for academic texts from the general reading public, and educational radio/television outside of academic settings has not gained much attention by media users. Media messages provide us with something we can use in our daily lives.

3. We do not, generally, use media merely to pass time. People who are bored do not attend to media messages any better than they do to any other form of activity. We may become bored with media, but we don't seem to turn to media because we are bored.

4. Most media usage is not characterized by "intense viewing done with all one's critical and conscious faculties at the fore . . . people don't /use media/ that way." 11

5. We do not use all media the same way, nor do we necessarily use specific media for specific purposes. Our use of media appears to be related to the nature of the media, and we develop differing receiver behaviors for differing media.

6. The greater the number of differing media which develop and the more each medium develops as a source of varied messages, the more the media depend upn each other for definition. All, then, become useful to us. One medium is not better than another; we simply use the media available to us to accomplish whatever our purposes may be.

7. And finally, "communication is functional, and communication competence involves skill in achieving these functions. Consequently, communication competence involves functional effectiveness." [12]

Given that communication competence involves functional effectiveness, we must, then, describe the functions associated with media usage. A number of scholars have proposed as many different categories of function as there are scholars. [13] An examination of the various functions included in each of the categories suggests, however, that there is a great deal of similarity. The choice becomes that of deciding which category to use.

The choice of taxonomy of communication functions is certainly arbitrary, but in order to achieve some commonality within the discipline the Speech Communication Association Project Task Force recommends that teachers structure communication functions into five groupings representing the dominant uses of communication today.[14] These categories are based in large part on the work of Gordon Wells.[15] These groupings of function include (from a user's perspective) (1) securing information, (2) controlling or developing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, (3) imagining, (4) feeling, and (5) ritualizing. The following chart describes the kind of communication acts associated with each of these functions.

Information

We seek and use information to

- create meaning
  - acquire meaning for new symbols
  - acquire new meanings for known symbols
  - displace existing meanings
  - reinforce established meanings
- determine deficiencies in knowledge; intellectual development
- make comparisons and contrasts of cognition
- establish intent, opinion, inference, position
- critically evaluate from own perspective
- construct a conceptual framework of reality; establish structure and order
- confirm the status quo
  - avoid dissonance
  - reassure
- satisfy needs and goals
- secure warnings
- establish and state relationship among cognitions
- give us something to talk about
- define status and success

Control

We seek and use media messages to help us

- determine the "rules of the game"
- develop attitudes and behaviors regarding social action
- support a point of view or discover other points of view; establish lines of argument
- determine how we should think about our physical and social reality
- control our communication environment
- discover appropriate behavior models
  - identification
  - guidance
  - evaluation of self; personal identity
  - affirmation

establish a sense of security

predictibility

habituation

create order

legitimize our status; credibility

discover what others expect of us

develop and reinforce values

secure advice

determine the consequence of actions

functional

dysfunctional

Imagining

We seek and use media messages in order to

fantasize

escape reality

withdrawal

compensation

outlet for harmful impulses

experience events

variety of experiences

sphere of experiences

vicarious experiences

fulfill wishes

participate in creative activities

satisfy curiousity

provide a basis for speculation; theorizing

identify with characters; experience roles

experience the familiar; the stable

divert our attention

from routine

from burdens of problems

from obligations; role demands

Feeling

We seek and use media messages in order to

relax; as a respite

experience a mood

identify and experience emotions

provide emotional release
assuage
tension release
catharsis
identify and reduce dissatisfaction
experience stimulation
seek sensation
seek pleasure
develop our confidence

Ritualizing

We seek and use media messages to help us
determine what our society is like
pattern our culture
discover our social inheritance
determine how we should behave toward each other
facilitate social cohesion
facilitate social contact
discover social norms; customs
identify social amenities
determine our social prestige
facilitate interaction or avoid interaction
topics of conversation
passively participate
participate in social rituals
satisfy a need for companionship; substitute friends

This listing of functional communication acts is neither comprehensive nor is it intended to imply that at any given time we do not use a specific medium for more than one purpose. Nevertheless, it can be a useful guide for the development of activities for students asked to examine their own media usage behavior.

Media Consumer Skills.

Joseph McCaleb (1977), writing about receiver-oriented courses in communication, stated that "the average person is involved in receiving messages

much more than in sending them. . . Therefore, the receiver needs to be equiped as a critic capable of analyzing, evaluating, and screening rhetorical efforts." [16] To critically evaluate from our own perspective requires that we develop the ability to reflect upon and describe media events, to define those events in terms of objective criteria, and to decide upon the meaning of those events in view of our own needs and purposes.[17] As Becker (1983) points out, every bit "of information that we sense is tested in some way against the structures or meanings that we have . . . this demand that a perception be meaningful . . . helps us avoid being overwhelmed by the infinite number of information fragments in our environments." [18] Gumpert and Cathcart (1982) suggest that the ability to look at ourselves objectively while in the midst of an activity is difficult, but, like an actor performing and analyzing his own performance at the same time, this ability can be learned. [19]

Communication interaction is a complex process, and obviously requires the effective utilization of a wide range of skills. Because there are so many skills involved, teachers must make decisions about which skills to focus instruction upon. The following chart suggests some of those media receiver skills which seem to be most clearly related to effective media usage. Generally, these can be categorized into those skills associated with understanding (1) oneself in relation to media, (2) the context in which the medium message is received, and (3) the content of media messages.

Self-Analysis Skills

We can improve our media usage by examining our own
media consumption habits; selectivity
frame of reference; interests, motivations, values,
expectations, attitudes, needs
ability to discriminate among purposes
knowledge of the social environment, cultural
background, reference groups

learning behavior
- recall skills
- primacy-recency tendencies
- retention ability
- need for repetition
- learning styles

message receptivity

Context Associated Skills

We can improve our media usage by improving our abilities to
- concentrate, focus, attend
- adjust to physical/mental distractions
- identify the social context of the medium
- discover new media sources
- locate the most useful media sources
  - accessibility
  - likelihood of utility

Content Analysis Skills

We can improve our media usage by improving our abilities to
- recognize intent/purpose
- judging utility and credibility
- discriminate between
  - fact and opinion
  - fantasy and reality
- relate message values to own values
- identify message bias
- relate the known to the unknown
- determine relevancy
- determine relationships
- draw inferences
- identify thesis, main ideas
- identify mood, feelings
- identify detail
  - implications
  - sufficiency
  - significance

follow sequence
summarize, synthesize, paraphrase
identify nonverbal and contextual cues

Implied in many of the skills listed above is a recognition of the fact that media consumers must make a great many judgments about messages/message sources and the effectiveness of any given message in meeting our needs. Developing criteria by which users can make appropriate judgments about media events, then, would seem to be a third area of significant concern to the teacher of a course focusing on media consumers.

Judgment Criteria.

Often we seem to equate consumption habits or frequency of use of media with attractiveness and utility, e.g., since we consume more televised messages than any other media message sources, television must be more useful and attractive to us. On the other hand, we may tend to assume that print media are more reliable and credible sources of information than other media sources. Neither of these generalizations is necessarily valid. Research suggests, in fact, that frequency of use is not "a valid criterion for evaluating the effectiveness or attractiveness of a given channel." [20] Nor is there much evidence "that people judge any medium as inherently credible . . . credibility is not a stable attribute - it is highly situational." [21]

Basically, we appear to make judgments about the utility and credibility of various media messages based on our responses to these three questions:

1. Does a specific mediated message give us what we want; does it do the job?
2. What are the costs associated with using a specific medium in relation to the value we can expect to obtain by using that medium?
3. How accurate and appropriate do specific media sources tend to be?

The following chart indicates some of the variables we have used traditionally to evaluate messages and messages sources in interpersonal, group, and public

communications. Although these are drawn for the most part, from general communication research and techniques of rhetorical analysis, these variables would also seem to be applicable to the process of judging mediated messages and media sources.

Message Source

Criteria for judging the quality and utility of specific media sources include determining the

author of the message
author's status, credibility, expertise, reputation
position of advocacy
objectivity, bias
reliability of the source
primary sources, secondary
confirmation process
value system of the source

Message Content

Criteria for judging the quality and utility of specific mediated messages include analysis of use of

fairness, balance
insinuation
adjectives
negative, positive labels
colloquialisms
types of behavior
behavioral categorizations
stereotyping
demographic distortion
space, time placement
length, structure, form
source citation
relevant, irrelevant material
nonlinguistic (nonverbal) cues
association
celebrity, authority, the past

good names, famous phrases
social movements

relationships

cause-effect
if-then, if not-then not
juxtaposition
coincidental
logical

Since, however, the messages we receive from the media are the consequence of our own perceptions, drawn from a variety of media sources rather than from any single event, accurate and appropriate judgments about source and content must be based upon a consideration of this multiplicity of exposure. For example, our perceptions about a given political event may be based upon a front page news story, a magazine article, a morning radio news headline, and a couple of televised news reports. The extent to which our message is balanced, then, depends upon the balance we have created from among the varied events we have used as much, if not more so, than on the balance provided by any single media source.

Influencing Media

Presuming, then, that we understand our own message needs and media usage behavior, that we have developed appropriate media usage skills, and that we have learned to effectively evaluate the messages we consume, a fourth area of concern merits our attention. That is, how can we influence media sources to produce the kind of messages we need and want? As Chaffee and Petrick (1975) point out, "we need to understand the [media] institutions that serve [us], and to get across to those institutions the nature of the services [we] need and want. . . . The mass media can be thought of as a general societal resource that is 'there,' potentially open to any of us for many purposes." [22]

Most mass communication texts provide the student with the information

necessary to understand the nature of our media institutions. Most, also, give some attention to the means by which we can influence the media, including

- gaining access
- preparing self to campaign intelligently for change
  - a thought-out position of advocacy
  - familiarity with the media
  - familiarity with regulatory provisions
  - legal rights and privileges
- affiliation with peers in groups/organizations
- knowledge of interested bodies
  - government agencies
  - legislative committees
  - executive offices
  - professional associations
- utilization of techniques for giving feedback

Conclusion.

This article began with two propositions. The first suggested that media consumption refers, essentially, to our functional usage of media. The second, then, stated a need for mass communication courses that purport to focus upon a consumer perspective to emphasize the learning of effective media usage skills. The purpose of the article is to suggest that such courses be structured to include the study of (1) a functional perspective on media usage, (2) media listening and reading skills, (3) development of evaluative criteria, and (4) means by which consumers can influence the media.

A part of the rationale for this pedagogical approach centers upon the belief that our media usage affects the nature of our media; that the impact of media on society is more the result of our use of the media than media source intentions. If this is true, then we must consider another possibility. That is, as we become more skilled in the effective use of media

technology to meet our needs, the more we begin to develop new and other needs and desires requiring new forms of mediated messages. Any media course of instruction with a consumer perspective will have to address this issue as well if it is to facilitate student learning of effective media usage.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Communication Education, Vol. 32, No. 4, (October, 1983).

[2] Ithiel de Sola Pool, "Tracking the Flow of Information," Science, Vol. 221, No. 4611, (12 August, 1983), 609.

[3] Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass.: G.C. Merriam Company, 1979) 73.

[4] See, for example, Jay Black and Frederick C. Whitney, Introduction to Mass Communication (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company, Publishers, 1983); John R. Bittner, Mass Communication: An Introduction, Third Edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1983); Stanley J. Baran, Jerilyn S. McIntyre, and Timothy P. Meyer, Self, Symbols & Society: An Introduction to Mass Communication (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1984).

[5] Baran, McIntyre, and Meyer, Self, Symbols & Society, 3.

[6] See, for example, Melvin L. DeFleur and Everette E. Dennis, Understanding Mass Communication (Geneva, Il.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981); Steven H. Chaffee and Michael J. Petrick, Using the Mass Media: Communication Problems in American Society (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975); Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, The Interplay of Influence: Mass Media & Their Publics in News, Advertising, Politics (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1983); Joseph R. Dominick, The Dynamics of Mass Communication (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1983); Donald N. Wood, Mass Media and the Individual (N.Y.: West Publishing Company, 1983); W. Phillips Davison, James Boylan, and Frederick T.C. Yu, Mass Media: Systems & Effects (N.Y.: Praeger Publishers, 1976).

[7] Lee Thayer, "On the Mass Media and Mass Communication: Notes Toward a Theory," in Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart (eds.) Inter/Media: Interpersonal Communication in a Media World, Second Edition (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1982) 137.

[8] Barry Brummett,"Some Implication of 'Process' or 'Intersubjectivity:' Postmodern Rhetoric," Philosophy and Rhetoric, Vol. 9 (1976) 28 and 29.

[9] Samuel L. Becker, Discovering Mass Communication (Glenview, Il.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1983), 22.

[10] Ibid., 75.

[11] Jib Fowles, Television Viewer vs. Media Snobs (N.Y.: Stein and Day/ Publishers, 1982), 93.

[12] Brian H. Spitzberg, "Communication Competence as Knowledge, Skill, and Impression," Communication Education, Vol. 32, No. 3, (July 1983) 362.

[13] See, for example, Herta Herzog, "What Do We Really Know About Daytime Serial Listeners," in Lazarsfeld and Stanton, Radio Research: 1942-1943 (N.Y.: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944); Mark R. Levy, "The Audience Experience with Television News," Journalism Monographs, Vol. 55 (April 1978); Denis McQuail, Jay G. Blumler, and J. R. Brown, "The Television Audience," in Denis McQuail (ed.) Sociology of Mass Communications (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin, 1972); William Stephenson, The Play Theory of Mass Communication (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Elihu Katz, Michael Gurevitch, and Hadassah Haas, "On the Uses of the Mass Media for Important Things," American Sociological Review,Vol. 38 (1973); Stefan R. Melnik, "The 'Uses and Gratifications' Approach in the Study of 'Entertainment' and Leisure Use," in Fischer and Melnik, Entertainment: A Cross-Cultural Examination, (N.Y.: Hastings House, Publishers,1979); and (cited above) Becker, Discovering Mass Communication; Thayer, "On the Mass Media and Mass Communication;" and Fowles, Television Viewer vs. Media Snobs.

[14] R. R. Allen and Kenneth L. Brown, Developing Communication Competence in Children, (Skokie, Il: National Textbook Company, 1976).

[15] Gordon Wells, Coding Manual for the Description of Child Speech (Bristol, England: University of Bristol School of Education, 1973).

[16] Joseph L. McCaleb, "Centering the Communication Course Upon the Receiver of Persuasive Messages," Communication Education, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Sept. 1977), pp. 227-228.

[17] R. L. Lanigan, "The Phenomenology of Human Communication," Philosophy Today, Vol. 23 (1979), pp. 3-15.

[18] Becker, Discovering Mass Communication, pp. 113-114.

[19] Gumpert and Cathcart, Inter/Media, p. 12.

[20] Steven H. Chaffee, "Mass Media and Interpersonal Channels: Competitive, Convergent, or Complementary?" in Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart (eds.), Inter/Media, p. 70.

[21] Ibid., p. 59.

[22] Chaffee and Petrick, Using the Mass Media, pp. 55-56.